

NATURAL COMMUNITIES

A natural community is defined as a distinct and reoccurring assemblage of populations of plants, animals, bacteria, and fungi naturally associated with each other and their physical environment. A natural community thus combines biological and habitat elements. Only land in an approximately natural state is classified as a natural community. For example, the many loblolly pine plantations in Pender County are not regarded as natural communities, as they are quite different from the communities that would have occurred under natural conditions. Natural community names and classification as used here are from Schafale (1994) and Schafale and Weakley (1990).

A total of 36 natural community types and variants were documented during the natural area inventory. Among these are a few community types that are very rare globally, and some of the best examples anywhere of others. Rocky Point Marl Forest contains the only known example anywhere of the Wet Marl Forest natural community, and the Pine Savanna Pleea Flat Variant is found only in the Maple Hill area of Pender County and at a few sites in Brunswick County. Occurrences of the globally rare Pine Savanna Very Wet Clay Variant in Pender County are among the best examples of this community restricted to eastern North Carolina. Tidal Cypress–Gum Swamp occurrences in the Black River and Northeast Cape Fear River tidal floodplains are regarded as among the best examples over the range of this southeastern U.S. community. Streamhead Atlantic White Cedar Forest habitat near Black River northwest of Atkinson marks the only outer Coastal Plain example of this community in North Carolina. Because of the extensive areas of frequently burned (at least historically) sandy uplands and peaty wetland flats, Pender County contains several natural communities associated with longleaf pine(11) and pocosin (seven) ecosystems. Each occurrence of every community type is briefly described in the Site Descriptions section of this report. A grouping of community types according to ecological relationships is provided in Table 2.